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POWER TO ENGAGE

Cultural Fitness for Business Process Management: What is it and what is it worth?



By [Theresa Schmiedel](#), [Jan vom Brocke](#) & [Jan Recker](#)

While business process management (BPM) is often associated with large investments in IT systems and process analysis projects, the success of BPM initiatives largely depends on the cultural readiness of organizations for process management. In this article, we introduce a model that helps to understand the role of culture in managing business processes and to take the right investments into the development of organizational culture. For that purpose, we also describe an assessment tool that allows examining the supportiveness of an organizational culture for BPM initiatives. We show how the results of such an assessment help organizations to determine in which areas of a corporation investments in cultural change can be most beneficial.

All processes are modeled, all process metrics defined, all process support systems are set up; yet still, processes are not running smoothly and departmental silos are more present than ever. Both practitioners and academics tell the same story. “A successful business process management (BPM) implementation goes beyond investing in the right systems.” In fact, an important success factor for BPM is investing in the establishment of the right organizational culture, that is, a culture that supports the achievement and maintenance of efficient and effective business processes.

While research and practice used to focus on technological and methodological aspects of BPM, there is a growing

awareness that BPM requires a more holistic understanding. In recent years, a broad range of studies have presented a comprehensive grasp of BPM, one of the most prominent examples being the BPM maturity model of Rosemann and de Bruin, which identifies – apart from methods and IT – strategic alignment, governance, people, and culture as core factors for BPM¹. Especially, culture is more and more recognized as a highly relevant factor in BPM.

Depending on the context of a specific BPM initiative, culture – the shared values of a group that become visible in actions and structures – can both be a source of failure and a reason for success of BPM. For example, cultural resistance to change influences the success of BPM initiatives negatively, while BPM can also lead to cultural change supporting the initiative. On the one hand, culture is recognized to influence BPM and on the other hand, BPM is recognized to influence culture.

“A successful business process management (BPM) implementation goes beyond investing in the right systems.”

“The ability for BPM to permeate the organization and drive value to multiple areas of the business is heavily dependent upon organizational culture.” (Aberdeen Group)

We have been doing extensive research into the different facets of a BPM culture. Based on our research, we have developed the BPM-Culture-Model, which structures the different notions of culture in a BPM context. Based on this model, we take a closer look at the cultural compatibility of an organization with a BPM approach, that is, we examine how we can measure the supportiveness of an organizational culture to a BPM approach. To that end, we introduce a tool that we developed to individually examine the cultural fitness of organizations for business process management. This assessment allows us to assist organizations to focus their investments in the development of change-ready organizational culture on areas with the biggest potentials.



Figure 1. BPM-Culture-Model

The BPM-Culture-Model²

By means of the BPM-Culture-Model we intend to contribute to a better understanding of the notion of culture in BPM. Based on our research on BPM theory and applications, we found that (1) specific cultural values exist that are considered as being supportive for reaching BPM objectives, (2) specific BPM initiatives, however, face different organizational values according to their context, and (3) BPM approaches suggest to develop those organizational values that are supportive of BPM in order to have BPM initiatives running smoothly. The BPM-Culture-Model therefore distinguishes between three major elements: (1) BPM culture, (2) cultural context and (3) cultural fit, which are illustrated in Figure 1.

BPM Culture describes those values that are inherent in the management approach and which need to be adopted by an organization³, i.e. the CERT-values Customer orientation, Excellence, Responsibility, and Teamwork⁴. It refers to a culture that is supportive of achieving BPM objectives, i.e. efficient and effective business processes.

“The CERT-values are key to the success of BPM in practice.” (Practitioner)

Cultural Context refers to the complex cultural environment that a BPM initiative faces at its start. It consists of various intertwined group cultures that exist in any corporate environment, such as national, organizational and work group cultures.

Cultural Fit refers to the basic congruence between BPM culture and cultural context that is required for a BPM approach to be successful. Cultural fit between the context and the BPM initiative are of utmost importance. For example, we found that if BPM supportive values are core elements of an organizational culture, BPM implementations will run smoothly. If these values are not being lived in the context of a BPM initiative, however, many problems can manifest:

(1) Cultural resistances can arise, which shows how the organizational cultural context influences the BPM approach. These resistances can be accompanied by one of the following two alternatives during the implementation.

“Cultural Fit refers to the basic congruence between BPM culture and cultural context that is required for a BPM approach to be successful.”

(2a) Growing understanding of the BPM approach in the organization can lead to cultural change in that the organization embraces BPM-supportive values, i.e. it broadens its canon of cultural values and develops a culture that is supportive of achieving BPM objectives. Alternatively,

(2b) The existing cultural context is inflexible and does not adapt to the cultural requirements of a BPM approach, i.e. the organizational culture does not embrace BPM-supportive values.

“It is important to notice that culture as such and the cultural context in particular is a very multifaceted phenomenon.”

Though some organizations even have explicit corporate values and respective campaigns to develop their culture⁵, a homogeneous organizational culture does not exist. In fact, each employee comes with a personal cultural background formed by his or her very individual journey of life. In this context, work-group culture and national culture are typically referred to. For example, resistance towards a BPM approach can differ from department to department due to diverse value orientations within these groups. The adoption of BPM-supportive values is not intended to erase all differences between the involved cultural groups, yet it is intended to provide a common canon of values on an organizational level which enables the successful realization of a BPM approach.

The three main elements of the BPM-Culture-Model represent core elements to explain the role of culture in BPM. In the following, we take a closer look at how an organization can evaluate the extent to which its organizational culture is already supportive of achieving BPM objectives, i.e. how fit the organization is for BPM.



Figure2. Eight measurement components of the Culture-Assessment-Tool

Culture-Assessment-Tool

Based on the understanding of BPM culture described above, we developed an assessment tool to measure the cultural fitness of an organization for BPM. The tool was developed on the basis of several studies that we conducted over a period of two years, and which involved major thought leaders in the field of BPM from both academia and practice. It measures how far organizations live the CERT-values of Customer orientation, Excellence, Responsibility, and Teamwork⁶. Figure 2 shows how the instrument measures eight distinct cultural value dimensions and how it can describe the extent to which these value dimensions are present in their organization. The three culture profiles in Figure 2 represent hypothetical examples for a culture that is generally rather supportive of BPM, a culture that is partially supportive and partially rather unsupportive of BPM, and a culture that is generally rather unsupportive of BPM (profile 3).

The tool is implemented as an online survey that allows representatives of organizations to do a self-assessment of their organizational culture. It can be accessed via the following link: www.bpm-culture.org. As it is part of our ongoing studies on the BPM culture topic, the tool can be used free of charge during our research. Participants of the survey are provided with an immediate analysis of their personal results. Organizations that are interested in a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis have the options of requesting detailed assessment reports of their culture, the different subcultures, or even a benchmarking assessment against other organizations in the industry sector.

Determining Areas for Culture Investments

“To date, representatives from more than 250 organizations examined the fitness of the culture of their organizations for

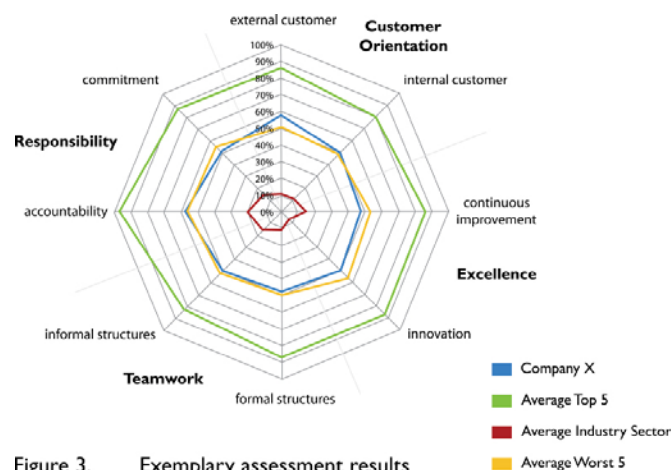
BPM.” Several major global corporations from the aeronautic, automotive, and engineering industries with headquarters in Germany, Liechtenstein, or Switzerland assessed their culture in-depth involving either specific areas of their corporation or the entire firm across the globe. Figure 3 shows exemplary assessment results of one of those companies as well as benchmarking insights from their industry sector. Based on these results, the organization decided to make a start on the mediocre perception of their culture by initially focusing on two culture components, which were perceived worse than by the average of firms in the industry sector i.e. innovation and commitment. The example shows that the cultural assessment helps organizations to derive an overall strategy on what their management attention should focus on.

“The assessment serves as a means to determine in which areas of the organization it is most beneficial in terms of investing in the development of a desired to-be culture.”

Furthermore, a comparison between the perceptions of the organizational culture by different departments provides an indication to management which areas of the company particularly require attention. For example, it seemed surprising that in one company, the accounting and finance department perceived the corporation far more customer oriented than the sales and marketing department. This gap in perception provides a basis for the organization to examine how to improve their cultural fitness in specific areas of the company.

Based on the assessment of their culture, organizations can deduce and design specific activities to develop their corporate culture. In other words, the assessment serves as a means to determine in which areas of the organization it is most beneficial in terms of investing in the development of a desired to-be culture.

“Management attention to organizational culture is not (only) about creating a nice working atmosphere but it is about creating value for the organization. Investments in corporate culture immediately pay off.”



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Conclusion

In our research, we found evidence for the vital role of the organizational culture to succeed in BPM initiatives. Talking with thought leaders around the globe, we learned that culture is often neglected and one of the major reasons for IT and Business Transformation projects to fail in practice. Having said this, we do not mean that IT is not important. On the contrary, IT is without any doubt a key driver for innovation today. At the same time, however, investments in IT and business analysis projects are not enough. In order to leverage the potential of modern IT, a more comprehensive approach is needed that particularly embraces organizational culture.

“From our experience, we advise organizations to put people back into the loop by making them responsible and passionate for improvement and innovation.”

The tool we presented enables an organization to analyze the status of their culture and to take specific measures for developing their cultural fitness. Despite of embarking on heavy business analysis projects, smart and specifically targeted initiatives that develop the organizational culture can help to reach much more immediate and sustainable results. From our experience, we advise organizations to put people back into the loop by making them responsible and passionate for improvement and innovation. Then, as we have observed, the rest will follow much more easily and much more effectively than most organizations would think.

For more information please visit <http://www.bpm-culture.org>

About the Authors

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Jan vom Brocke is Full Professor and Hilti Chair of Business Process Management at the University of Liechtenstein. He is Director of the Institute of Information Systems and President of the Liechtenstein Chapter of the Association for Information Systems (AIS). Jan has more than fifteen years of experience in IT and BPM projects and has published more than 180 refereed papers in the proceedings of internationally perceived conferences and established IS journals, including the *Business Process Management Journal (BPMJ)* and *Management Information Systems Quarterly (MISQ)*. He is author and co-editor of 16 books, including Springer's *International Handbook on Business Process Management* and the recently published Springer book *Green BPM – Towards the Sustainable Enterprise*. He is an invited speaker and trusted advisor on BPM around the globe. His research and publications can be accessed at <http://www.uni.li/bpm>. You can contact Jan via mail (jan.vom.brocke@uni.li) or LinkedIn or subscribe to his tweets (www.twitter.com/janvombrocke).

Jan Recker is Full Professor and Woolworths Chair of Retail Innovation at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. Jan's research interests focus on process design practices in organizations, IT-enabled business transformations and organizational innovation. Jan has authored and edited several books, including one on process design, one on Green BPM, and one on scientific research methods. He co-authored over 100 academic papers in journals and conferences and presented his research all over the globe. He holds a PhD in Information Systems from Queensland University of Technology and a MS in Information Systems from the University of Muenster, Germany. His research and publications can be accessed at <http://www.janrecker.com/>. The best way to contact Jan is via email (j.recker@qut.edu.au). You can subscribe to his tweets at <http://www.twitter.com/janrecker>.

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